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CHAPTER X

COGS IN THE POLITICAL MACHINERY

Ritual suicide, divine selection, the fire rite, and military as aspects of the royal complex of institutions—links in the political system forged by the wives of the queen—the part women play in politics—structure and individuality of the districts.

631
643 The political system is not a thing apart, standing aloof from marriage and social structure. These and other institutions are closely interwoven. The political scheme is effective largely because it is patterned upon the arrangements and relies upon the genius of the social system. Its most emphasized aspects are the elaboration of institutions which centre in the queen and the highly developed local administration in the hands of the district heads. The districts form a federation rather than a union, but their autonomy is counterbalanced by subtle devices holding them closely together in the meshes of a web radiating from the capital. The district and the tribe itself may, from certain points of view, be regarded as the village writ large, but the village is not a political unit, and the approach from its organization is not comprehensive enough for fruitful examination.

The district, with its distinctive community life, is linked to the capital upon the pattern of reciprocities created by marriage and exogamy, the system thus harmonizing with the most powerfully supported institutions. The reliance upon the queen as a rain-making divinity further stimulates the growth of a common tribal consciousness. Elsewhere chiefs are also rain magicians, but failure to produce rain is not a fatal defect. The Lovedu queen, however, suffers deposition if she fails, and it is upon her rain-making divinity that are based the structure of the royal institutions and much of the political system. And the two systems, centring apparently poles apart, the one in marriage and exogamy and the other in rain-making, have been interlocked as skilfully as the most intricate piece of machinery.

The complexity of the tribe as regards constituent groups, and the submergence of the royal group amid the other groups create a problem which, from the point of view of tribal solidarity, could conceivably be solved in many ways. The Lovedu solution stresses local autonomy side by side with social links. Many functions elsewhere reserved to chiefs are exercised by district heads, and the theoretical authority of the queen is seldom interposed in practice. Yet they are powers of persuasion, not of coercion. Her authority is congruent with the main emphases of the society: the reliance on compromise, the aversion from military institutions, and the subtlety of feminine persuasion. These characteristics promoted the willing allegiance of the many foreigners drawn to the sanctuary of Lobedu, where they were safeguarded, not only against their foes, but also against the uncertainties of nature. In return for protection and security, they sent their daughters and sisters to be the wives of the

[See categories 51 and 52 in Analysis]

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queen. And in the system these wives, after a period of training at the royal court, were re-allocated to district heads and royal relatives.

The system is not unknown elsewhere. Among the Shona, as we are told by Bullock, when one tribe conquered another, the survivors were incorporated by being given wives; in time of famine, tribes sometimes exchanged their daughters for food; and some of the Mambo handed their wives to their bodyguard, who gave in return, not bride-price, but faithful service. The Rozwi appear to have maintained their dominance over subjected chiefs, not by deposing them, but by assisting in their ceremonial appointment and the superimposition of the cult of Mwari, the high god, which had its priesthood and could withhold rain. This cluster of institutions is interesting to us because the Lovedu came from these parts and have retained some of their features. Lovedu district heads give 'tributary' wives to the queen in exchange for rain and these wives are re-allocated to important men. But the form and setting of the institution has changed; the circulation of wives, drawn into the network of the political and social scheme, subserves the purposes of the Lovedu cultural configuration.

By singling out for brief consideration the complex of royal institutions and of districts, we are giving prominence to certain aspects of the political structure. That is unavoidable in a generalized account, which must largely ignore the variations among the 140 districts (of which fifty are on European-owned land). We have often referred to cultural divergences and the tolerance towards them. In the autonomous districts they are very much in evidence. You may be told over and over again there is no such thing as ancestors represented by snakes, except among the possessed and in their cult; and the conception seems alien to a religion in which ancestors are not reincarnated in an animal, but animals may be dedicated to ancestors. Yet suddenly one day you may find that the sacred object (shapshi) of a head of a district, such as Rain, is a snake. The lack of uniformity and the tolerance of almost contradictory customs may give the impression of ineffective political institutions. Conformity there must be in the interests of economy and solidarity, but the conformity need not be that of a regimented society such as ours. As to the royal cluster of institutions, we shall consider these maintaining the confidence of the people in the powers of the queen, and these converting tribute of wives into the visible links of the social organization. The elaboration of the royal institutions must not, however, obscure the essential humanity of the queen; we do not deal with the latter, but we must remember that it is a factor of great importance in the dynamics of these institutions.

In 150 years there have been only three queens, and Mujaji III, who, having already ruled for over forty-three years, is still physically strong and is said never to have had a day's illness. The Lovedu attach little importance to the longevity of their queens, who in other tribes have been immortalized. In the north, whence the Lovedu came, kings ruled only for brief periods; they were not allowed to become old or decrepit, lest the kingdom suffer; and either they committed suicide or they were killed. Dos Santos, writing in 1607, records that the kings of

5:Krige E-5 (1936-1938, 1961-1962) 1964
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PROPERTY, CROSS-COUSIN MARRIAGE, AND THE FAMILY CYCLE AMONG THE LOBEDU[1]

Eileen Jensen Krige

THE Lobedu are a South Bantu people characterized by the institution of 'divine kingship'. They live in a mountainous area of the North-eastern Transvaal lowveld. Originally from *Bekhalaga* (S. Rhodesia), they migrated south when the empire of Monomotapa broke up and established themselves as rulers over the sparse Sotho population they found in occupation. The rain-making powers of their queen, enhanced by the mystery and secrecy of her ritual seclusion, attracted many accretions from diverse tribal groups from surrounding areas who sought security and peace particularly during the period of unrest following the wars of Shaka, the Zulu, and the raids of Matabele and Swazi. For enemies feared to attack the Lobedu queen lest they be visited by drought and locusts. The descendants of the Lobedu proper therefore form only a small portion of the total population which, however, except for relatively recent Tsonga immigrants from Portuguese East Africa, is remarkably homogeneous in culture. The Lobedu had no military traditions and built up their kingdom by peaceful means.

The form of government is that of a central authority with the queen as the head of state and spatially defined political

[1]The field-work on which this essay is based was carried out jointly with my husband, the late J. D. Krige, under the auspices of the International African Institute in 1936–8, and was supplemented and brought up to date by short field trips in 1961 and 1962.

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642 units which, each under a headman, enjoy a considerable
631 degree of autonomy.[1] A large proportion of these districts into
634 which the country is divided are ruled by the descendants of
649 original sections of the nuclear group; a few have been allocated
562 to alien groups under their own headmen while some are held
643 by royal women, *batsadsi* or 'wives' of the queen. Many
588 districts now held by commoners originated from *batsadsi* but since women do not succeed one another as heads of districts these have been inherited by their sons of husbands given to them by the queen. Royal wives (*batsadsi*) are of various kinds. Some are of royal blood, daughters of close relatives of the queen to whom they have been given as a token of homage (*ku lobola*). Only these are set up by the queen as rulers over districts. (Women may also rule areas in their own right where there is no male heir, as we shall see). Other royal wives are
644 the daughters of district heads, while a number are daughters
643 of foreign chiefs who come, sometimes with cattle, sometimes
559 with money or a daughter to *lobola* the queen for rain. Once a
[582] woman from within the tribe has been accepted by the queen as a royal wife, the tie is renewed from generation to generation
[634] on the pattern of cross-cousin marriage. Men may offer a daughter to the queen also in return for, or in the expectation of, economic help or political favour (though these are not always accepted) and there is a tendency today for districts to be subdivided into smaller and smaller units to satisfy the political aspirations of ambitious subjects. Royal wives bind to the queen not only her closest relatives but most of the important people in the tribe. Some wives are given away in marriage to her councillors, relatives and district headmen.
[836] Some remain with her and have allocated lovers. Children of
[602] these latter call the queen 'father' and she is responsible for helping them to marry.

563 The Lobedu proper appear originally to have regarded
613 themselves as an aristocracy but today it is only the royal lineage (*ba Mokale*) and a number of important Lobedu district heads that are looked up to. Many non-Lobedu lineages have, by virtue of marriage links through royal wives, a higher status and are more closely related to the queen than sections of Lobedu themselves.

[1] For a general account of the Lobedu, see Krige, E. J. 1941, Krige, E. J. and J. D., 1943 and 1950, and Krige, J. D., 1939.